

Life in Suburbia: Land of Cliche

From my desk in my apartment in Cambridge, I see the green leaves of trees out the window and, when I step closer, winding streets with quirky shops and interesting people stretching out below them. From my desk in my old home in suburban Chicago, you see the same trees, but behind them is asphalt and McMansion and long twisting driveways.

No one here uses public transportation. The city does have a train station, but one gets the sense that its purpose is mostly decorative — train stations remind people of the imaginary small town life that suburbs attempt to imitate. To get out to your house, you instead drive down long stretches of drab gray highway, besotted by hideous billboards and lined with ugly office parks.

The weather is certainly nice. On most days, if you go for a walk it's quite beautiful — as long as you keep your head pointed at the sky, where the bright green leaves interweave with the brilliant blue. But as soon as you look down there are SUVs driving the wealthy to their half-hidden palazzos — just enough visible to be bragging, just enough hidden to be private.

Whereas in Cambridge the ambitious try to fill their houses with books, in suburbia you go for art and interior decorating. The tasteless fill their houses with large marble staircases and glistening chandeliers; the more tasteful prefer bright white rooms accented with sculptures and pictures — specific enough not to be intellectual, but abstract enough to be *art*.

You came back here to raise a family, but you wouldn't even consider sending them to public school. Why would you, when there's a perfectly good private school just twenty minutes away? There the kids are white and wealthy. After all, how could they be anything else at these tuition prices? The school does give out scholarships, but only based on "merit": "interviews, teacher recommendations, examination results and current school records". The school is in the wealthiest zip code in America, surrounded by trees and houses, like everything else in suburbia.

The school is preparing for graduation. You see a slide show of those about to receive their diplomas, seen when they're so young that the smiles leap off their faces. How could anything so precious be unhappy here, with everything in its right place? Afterwards the families mingle in the courtyards, surrounded by the gleaming metal of the newly-built extensions.

Not too far, another group of kids hides behind trees by the parking lot, protecting a cooler full of water balloons they use to pelt their fellow students as they try to reach their cars. One kid, his yellow country-club sweater tied around his neck, complimenting his finessed blond hair, hides behind a glass door, fear visible in his eyes as he looks at his newly-purchased convertible and prays it won't get hit. (He bought it, the kids explain, to match his new girlfriend. Then they turn and pelt two girls walking by.)

Despite their brazen acts, the kids are quite afraid — afraid of getting caught. They hide at the sight of parents or teachers and they restrain themselves from hitting the head of school's daughter. But they needn't worry. Parents see right through the charade and laugh it off. *Oh kids, oh kids and their water balloons.* *How delightful!* they say to themselves as they scurry to their cars.

The kids were right to guard the parking lots; not only is suburbia unmanageable without a car, driving cars is a central part of the culture: what kind, at what age, and where to? The funny thing is that there simply aren't that many places to go. There's your house, and your friends, and the shops uptown or at the mall.

Not that there's much difference between the two anymore. The malls have become open-air and the town centers have become so desiccated that they're little different, just chain shops surrounded by fake walkways to other chain shops. The difference, I suppose, is that in town centers no one uses the walkways — why bother when you can drive?

While the kids enjoy their eating and shopping, the mothers get down to business at the grocery store, a menagerie of food and drink and color. Huge carts are filled and paid for and then passed off to low-wage Mexicans, who load them in your car as you drive out of the parking lot.

In between the malls and downtown, even the fakery disappears and the raw commercialism that pervades the suburb is left naked, assuming its default form of ugly highway signs and strip malls, all in an almost nausea inducing gray, stretching out in all directions, leaving little escape.

Not all the people of the suburbs are cold and vicious as their surroundings. For the most part, they're "liberals", the kind who are deeply affected by the plight of the homeless as they head back to their minivan. A small sign at the menagerie of a grocery store draws attention to the plight of the hungry. No, you don't have to feed them; just feel bad: the sign advertises "[national hunger awareness day](#)" (sponsored, the web site says, "by many prominent organizations" — organizations like Macy's, Southwest Airlines, and the Food Marketing Institute).

After all, this is the generation of the New Left. 25 miles south, Chicago was rocked by the '68 Democratic Convention, where kids charged the city while filmed by newscameras, before the Chicago police decided to start beating up on both. The suburbanites didn't participate, of course, but they watched it on the news and felt sympathy for their brethren and invited the indicted Chicago 7 up to give a talk.

The war is now Iraq, not Vietnam, and the protest is more muted. A sculpture in the town center draws attention to our dead servicemen, while old ladies occasionally stage protests with large signs. Now the antiestablishment kids have become establishment parents, Mayor Daleys of their own households, full of tensions no less visible than those which engulfed Chicago.

Son one plays music too loud for son two who insists that right this minute he needs to play a video game. And when these fighting factions are supposed to come together, as in a graduation, the tensions boil over, parents screeching at kids who scream at each other, dragged down to the car where they argue about which windows to open and settings for the AC, until, realizing that they're all stuck there together, tensions cool down somewhat. Still, it doesn't seem like much fun for anyone.

At the graduation, everyone has a camera to immortalize this precious moment. They force everyone into straightening their rarely-worn suits and dresses and smiling in rarely-seen ways so that the camera can "capture the moment", an instant of artifice, entirely yanked from time, its history completely erased so that the fake smiles may be preserved.

The graduation itself is a whole event of such artifice: the students are trained to walk down the aisles absurdly slowly (while the organist stretches Pomp and Circumstance far, far beyond the breaking point) so that every parent may get copious photos of them standing in the aisle. Once on stage they fake their love for teachers they hated only days ago, while dressed in fake costumes and standing in front of a fake set. The parents are given programs whose professional typography hides the normal disarray of school, makes them think this place is Professional.

Oh, the absurdity of it all: putting all that effort into making memories they won't remember of good times they never had.

But I guess that's suburbia — the fake coat of paint that lets you pretend your unhappy life is just as nice as everyone else's, even if it easily flakes off.

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